Senate to Probe Killings of Israeli Agents

By Jim McGee
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The Senate intelligence committee will investigate a report that Israeli agents who infiltrated a Syrian-based terrorist group were killed last year shortly after a meeting in which Secretary of State James A. Baker III discussed with Syrian President Hafez Assad evidence implicating a Syrian-backed group in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103.

The New York Times reported yesterday that Bush administration officials fear that "two or three undercover agents" were unmasked after "terrorists obtained the intelligence information given to Syrian leaders and used it to track down the agents within the terrorists' ranks."

Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), chairman of the intelligence committee, said in a statement yesterday, "If these allegations are true, they would represent a tragic and indefensible compromise of our intelligence resources and a breach of faith with those who have risked their lives on our behalf."

State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler issued a statement saying, "The suggestion that Secretary Baker handed over a demarche that led to the death of any individual is categorically untrue." A demarche is a diplomatic message.

The same statement, however, mentioned another diplomatic communication that was aimed at heading off a terrorist attack against a U.S. diplomat in the Middle East. A government source said that communication, not the sharing of information with Syria, may be the inadvertent source of the information that led to the death of the Israeli agents.

Tutwiler's statement said, "Last year we received a credible and serious threat against a U.S. ambassador in the region. We act on such information. Therefore any demarche that may have been passed on such a subject would have been done solely to protect the life of an American ambassador and fully coordinated within the government, including our intelligence agencies."

The Times report said officials also held out the possibility that the groups discovered the information independently.

U.S. officials believe the Pan Am bombing was carried out by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, a group that is based in Syria.

But Baker and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Charaa said the United States and Syria did not agree on the strength of the evidence linking the Palestinian group to the bombing.